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WASHINGTON — For a man who says he could be condemned to death as early as next month, Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury is surprisingly calm.

Choudhury's crime: calling for diplomatic ties between his native Bangladesh and the State of Israel.

"The High Court has ruled that by conveying the message of the rise of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh to Jews and Christians and by advocating relations between Dhaka and Jerusalem, I have damaged the image of Bangladesh worldwide," Choudhury said.

The 41-year-old journalist and editor spoke to JTA in a 20-minute phone interview recently from Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital. He said his trial for sedition, blasphemy and treason, which began in September, will resume Jan. 22.

Irwin Cotler, Canada's former justice minister and attorney general, announced he would defend Choudhury. A past president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Cotler has represented prisoners of conscience Nelson Mandela, Jacobo Timerman and Natan Sharansky.

Choudhury, who is free on bail, said there is little chance of receiving a fair trial and he probably will be sentenced to death.

"The judicial system is corrupted by Islamic radicals," he said. "By continuing this trial and convicting me, they want to send the message that anyone else in Bangladesh who thinks as I do will face the same consequences."

Choudhury is the editor and publisher of the Weekly Blitz, an English-language newspaper

founded in 2003 that has 7,500 print subscribers and another 40,000 readers online. The newspaper is read regularly by Bangladeshi policy makers and businesspeople, as well as foreign diplomats.

A Muslim, Choudhury first came into contact with Jews in the early 1990s while working as Dhaka correspondent for the Russian news agency Tass.

He established friendships with Jewish colleagues despite the anti-Semitic propaganda so prevalent in Bangladesh, which is 85 per cent Muslim and ranks as the world's third-most populous Muslim nation after Indonesia and Pakistan.

"When I was a child, my father always encouraged us not to believe the Friday afternoon sermons of hate coming from the mosque," said Choudhury, who began a dialogue with editors at the Jerusalem Post three years ago and eventually was invited to Israel by the Hebrew Writers Association.

Choudhury never made it.

On Nov. 29, 2003, as he was about to board a plane in Dhaka for the circuitous journey to Jerusalem, where he was to attend a conference on the media's role in education for peace, Choudhury was arrested and his passport confiscated.

He "spent the next 17 months in hellish prison conditions, including torture, denial of medical attention and isolation" as the government tried to build a case that Choudhury was an Israeli spy, said David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee.

He was released in April 2005, thanks largely to the efforts of U.S. congressman Mark Kirk and Richard Benkin, a Jewish activist from Chicago.

Yet the sedition charge is pending, and in October, a mob of 40 Islamic militants beat

Choudhury in his Dhaka office – three months after the office was firebombed.

Choudhury initially was charged with passport violations; the sedition charges were added nearly two months later.

In late October, the Washington Times published an editorial urging the Bush administration to suspend \$63 million (US) in annual aid to Bangladesh unless the charges were dropped. Besides the AJCommittee, other organizations outspoken in the case include Reporters Without Borders, Scholars for Peace in the Middle East and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

In an article in the Montreal Gazette, Cotler asserted, “It is not Choudhury who should be on trial; rather, it is the Bangladesh authorities who have violated his fundamental rights guaranteed under the Bangladesh constitution, international treaties as well as the basic principles of criminal justice.”

Cotler noted the violation of Choudhury’s rights occurred despite Bangladesh’s involvement in the Canada-Bangladesh Rule of Law Project, which advocates joint initiatives to promote fundamental human rights and due process of law.

Shamsher Chowdhury, Bangladesh’s ambassador to the United States, insisted Choudhury is a liar and a criminal.

“In Bangladesh, nobody is a prisoner of conscience,” he stated. “There is no such thing as putting a journalist behind bars for expressing his views. We have total freedom of the press. If he’s saying he was arrested for advocating ties with Israel, then he’s not telling the truth. That cannot be a charge. That’s not sedition.

“In 2003, he leaked very classified information about the government which we thought endangered state security,” Chowdhury said.

Choudhury responded angrily to the ambassador's claims, calling them "nothing but a damn lie."

Benkin, the Chicago activist, said the Bangladeshi government "has never produced a scintilla of credible evidence against [Choudhury]. Over three years ago, they said he was guilty. They tortured him for 17 months and they're still carrying out this persecution."

He noted the Bangladeshi government demonizes Israel and has named a bridge after Hezbollah in the wake of the terrorist group's war against Israel last summer.

Benkin's website, <http://www.freechoudhury.com/>, calls on Americans to boycott apparel made in Bangladesh – a crucial industry that employs more than two million people – to pressure the government to drop the Choudhury case.

Despite the risks, Choudhury said he had no intention of asking for political asylum abroad.

"I'm not going to do that because there is no dignity, no pride or honour in quitting," he said. "I have complete faith and trust in God, and in my brothers and sisters around the world who are working on my behalf."